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For Newman, teacher's a winner NASCAR driver calls Cackowski his hometown hero.



Krissie and Ryan Newman, left, are pictured with Ryan's former LaSalle High School teacher, Frank Cackowski, a couple years ago in Bristol, Tenn. Ryan selected Cackowski as a "hometown hero" for a television program on the Speed Channel. Photo provided

By YONIKA WILLIS
Tribune Correspondent

It's not often that a retired school teacher has a national network TV crew flown to his home to discuss a former student.

But that's exactly what happened to former LaSalle High School teacher Frank Cackowski after the executive producer from the Speed Channel informed him that NASCAR driver Ryan Newman had selected him as one of his hometown heroes.

"They asked five or six drivers to name who they would consider a hometown hero and he said me because I give him encouragement," Cackowski, of Mishawaka, said.

It was during Newman's sophomore year at LaSalle that Cackowski was introduced to him through another student who knew Cackowski's interest in racing.

The two of them talked a bit that year, and the following year Newman was sitting in Cackowski's electronic communications class.

"He always took a lot of classes that would help him in his projected racing career," recalled Cackowski, who spent his entire 32-year career at LaSalle. "He was a good student and never missed school except for one day (during the year) and that was the day after the Daytona 500 Race."

Ironically, Newman would go on to win that race this year.

Newman thought that it was "kinda cool" that one of his teachers was interested in what he did, Cackowski said. "He was a kid competing in an adult world and he was good at what he

was doing.”

Throughout his high school days, Newman raced midget cars on a dirt track, Cackowski said, and Cackowski would show his support by sitting in the stands as a silent spectator. Cackowski's silent support continued as Newman moved up the racing ladder.

“When he first came on, I tried to catch everything he was on, but now he's on so much I can't keep up,” Cackowski said.

Newman and Cackowski are among several racers and hometown heroes featured on the Speed Channel's Hometown Heroes show.

And even though much of Newman's time is taken up with his racing career, he still finds time to keep in touch with his former teacher through e-mail and phone calls.

“Usually when we talk it's about fishing,” Cackowski said. “(Ryan's) an avid fisher. ... We don't have real long conversations because he's so busy, but he always takes the time.”

Perhaps that's what Cackowski admires most about Newman.

“What you see with Ryan is what you get,” he said. “There's nothing fake about him.”
